It Sounds Good to Me

By Lt. Charles E. Garrett

For the past eight months, our squadron had been preparing to support Operation Southern Watch. We trained to the OSW special instructions (SPINS) and the tactics we expected to use. As a cruise-experienced JO, and our combat search and rescue subject-matter expert, I gave many lectures on CSAR, SERE, and divert procedures.

Before we arrived on station, the events of Sept. 11 changed everything. We scrambled for information on our new area of operations until a comprehensive set of SPINS for Afghanistan were published. All of our initial SPINS questions had been answered when we began strikes into Afghanistan. However, all divert airfields were listed as "last resort only," most likely because no one had proved them feasible.

In our fifth week of sustained combat operations, I was scheduled as Dash 2 for a section night strike, deep into northeast Afghanistan. The weather was great, and we had KC-10 tanker

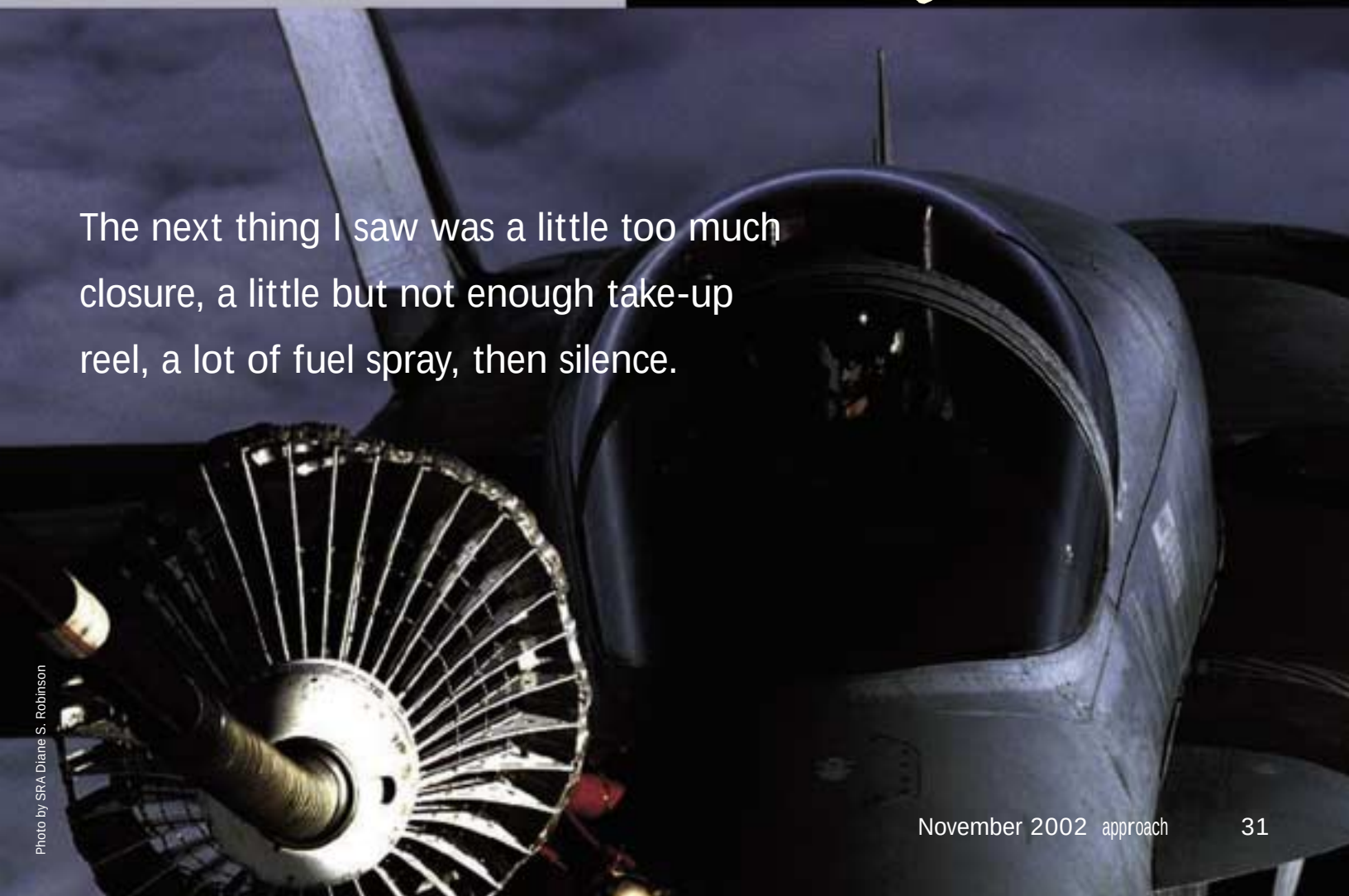

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Photo by SRA Diane S. Robinson

support for the six-hour mission. The only thing missing was a full moon. On start-up, I had a repeat INS-alignment problem that we solved by reconnecting a SINS cable a few times. At our rendezvous, my lead was plagued with a short in his mask and was intermittently NORDO. We decided to continue the mission, because this problem only was intermittent (it sounded good to me).

After pre-mission tanking, we checked in with the on station AWACS, but our controller instructed us to return to the tanker and await further instructions. My lead had problems answering the call and passed me the lead. I took the flight to the tanker. After we got gas, it was my lead's turn to tank.

The next thing I saw was a little too much closure, a little but not enough take-up reel, a lot of fuel spray, then silence. I asked, "Do you still have a probe?" Silence followed.

"How are your engines? What's your state?" The silence continued.

"Do you still have a probe?"

Finally, he answered, "No, I don't. Let's divert. My state is 7.5."

We pointed toward our divert of Jacobabad, Pakistan.

I knew the name of our divert, and I had its coordinates in my system, but that's all I knew. Since I'd heard planes had been shot at on their approach to Jacobabad, it made no sense sending a good plane into a place like that. I did not know how long my lead would be on deck.

My plan was to divert as a section, escort my probeless lead to a safe landing, return to our tanker, refuel, and return for the next recovery (it sounded good to me). As the controller processed my request, my wingman jiggled his cords and finally blurted out, "What about my NORDO? I think you should come with me."

I thought time was critical, and I made an instant decision. Somewhere in my helmet bag was the divert number, TACAN frequency, tower frequency, runaways and lengths. After some digging, and a few radio calls, I finally had all the info. We switched to tower, and, quite unexpectedly, an American voice answered, telling us to report "five miles out."

My plan was to remain high, with our lights off, to avoid small-arms fire. We would take separation on final, using our night-vision goggles, maintain sight of each other; and find the unlit runway. I briefed we'd remove our goggles in close and use our taxi light only if needed. We agreed.

Chalk it up to good training, but I at least remembered to call for feet-dry checks and to see if our anti-skid was on. Our plan worked great, right up until I took off the goggles. Apparently, there were no runway lights because I saw nothing without goggles. I did see the VASI and decided I could land beyond it. I floated a little, and I saw concrete immediately before touchdown.

The feeling of "Cool, I didn't get shot down" was interrupted by a flashing light in the gear handle and the landing gear warning-tone indications of a planing-link failure.

The aircraft tracked straight ahead, so I continued the rollout. My aircraft veered toward the right edge of the runway as I passed 100 knots. I knew I was in trouble when I hit the stops on the left rudder and still couldn't stop my right drift. I yelled something on the radio—I'll never know exactly what I said, but it made my wingman waveoff behind me. I went through the immediate-action items for loss of directional control on ground, while feeling like I was sliding or hydroplaning, instead of rolling. My hand twice wandered toward the ejection handle because it appeared the aircraft might veer sideways enough to roll. I came to rest 8,500 feet down the runway and far enough right for my wingman to land behind me.

I now was a stranger in a strange land. I told tower I was shutting down and getting out. The first person I met was a member of the Air Force on a four-wheeler wearing NVGs and carrying a sniper rifle. He gave me a cigarette and told me a green flare meant the airfield was under attack. He also said I should run toward the command post yelling "Betty Grable." He then drove away, leaving me in the dark.

I tried to calm down as Air Force personnel decided how to de-arm my aircraft (did I mention that my aircraft was loaded with three GBU-12s?) and how to clear my aircraft from the runway. I then watched—stunned—as my wingman, now refueled (and the only reason I was here in the first place), left me and flew back to

the ship to enjoy pizza night. As he taxied by, my flightsuit dropped to my knees, and, for him at least, the moon rose over Pakistan.

The next afternoon, a squadron rescue team arrived on an S-3 and fixed the aircraft in record time. We found the right main-connecting link had collapsed and bent on touchdown, which caused the right mainmount to toe-in, giving me the planing-link indications. The toe-in caused the veer and became progressively worse as I slowed. By the time I had stopped, the right wheel was toed-in about 15 degrees and canted-in about five degrees from vertical. The aircraft sat with an obvious list, and the tire was bald (send me to the grog bowl).

To top off this story, when I was ready to get back to mom, I started up, but, remember that INS problem I mentioned at the beginning of the article? Well, the INS was bad, and couldn't get a ground alignment. Not wanting to return at night without an INS alignment, I remained another night with my Air Force brethren until our carrier's helo guys delivered a new INS.

When planning for contingency operations in foreign countries, make sure you have all the divert information and keep it accessible. Nothing is worse than trying to remember where you put the divert info while flying at night to an unlit and unfamiliar runway. In this instance, the added angst of diverting to a field where hostile fire might be encountered required additional planning before flight to cover airborne decisions and ways to minimize enemy-fire risk.

When writing aircraft gripes, make sure you factor-in divert considerations. If you don't want to divert with it, down it.

You usually have enough time to take a step back when the unexpected occurs and to use all the resources available.

I was quite proud to be a member of an organization that is so flexible.

Lt. Garrett is assigned to the Weapons Test Squadron, NAS China Lake. He flew with VFA-22 at the time of the incident.

The author recognizes he did not follow NATOPS, which calls for immediately and completely executing the emergency procedures for loss of directional control on touchdown. However, he wanted to share his experience. Once you recognize a planing-link failure on touchdown, you must complete all emergency procedures. Loss of directional control happens suddenly and without warning.

An FA-18 Class A mishap shows how this very situation can turn out much worse. In that mishap, the pilot acted just as the author did. At approximately 100 knots, the jet swerved 60 degrees and departed the runway. Follow NATOPS completely.—Lt. Matt Bartel, FA-18 analyst, Naval Safety Center.

Mishap-Free Milestones

HS-5	8 years	(25,875 hours)
VAW-115	17 years	(36,000 hours)
HMM-268	16 years	(80,000 hours)
VMFA-27	16 years	
VAW-117	25 years	(53,000 hours)
VFA-136	9 years	(39,138 hours)